THE SEASON OF ADVENT HAS BEEN PART OF THE CHURcH YEAR SINCE-- about 400

BUT IN ALL FAIRNESS I THINK WE COULD PLACE THE FIRST ADVENT OBSERVANCE IN HTE YEAR 30 A.D. THE OBSERVER --JOHN THE BAPTIST.

VERY LITTLE FACTUAL MATERIAL IS KNOWN ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST. AFTER THE INCIDENT WHEN HE BAPTIZED JESUS NOTHING MORE IS HEARD OF HIM EXCEPT ON ONE OCCASION WHEN, FROM PRISON HE SENT TWO MESSENGERS TO ASK JESUS IF HE REALLY WAS THE MESSIAH.

WE CANNOT, HOWEVER, QUESTION HIS IMPORTANCE. THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS TOOK PAINS TO EMPHASIZE HIS RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS, HIS FULFILLMENT OF PRO - PHECY AND THE ROLE HE PLAYED IN THE RECOGNITION OF JESUS AS THE MESSIAH.

IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE WE ARE TOLD OF JOHN THE BAPTIST'S ORIGINS. HIS FATHER WAS A PRIEST--ZECHARIAH, HIS MOTHER'S NAME WAS ELIZABETH: THEY HAD LONG GIVEN UP HOPE FOR A CHILD. too old BUT AN ANGEL APPEARED TO ZECHARIAH INFORMING HIM THAT NOT ONLY WOULD HE HAVE A SON BUT A SON WHO WOULD BE USED BY THE LORD. IN LUKE'S ACCOUNT ELIZABETH AND MARY THE MOTHER OF JESUS ARE APPRENTLY FRIENDS, SOME HAVE SAID RELATIVES, MAKING JOHN & JESUS COUSINS. THIS IS NOT OUR CONCERN HERE, BUT WHAT IS, IS THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITER'S INCLUSION OF THIS MAN IN THEIR STORY AND THE RELATIONSHIP HE HAS TO THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL. - why is he included

HIS PAR NTS HAVING BEEN TOLD THAT HE WAS TO BE USED BY GOD, JOHN BECAME A LEVITE, THE NEW TESTAMENT TELLS US HE LIVED IN THE WILDERNESS, OFF THE FAT OF THE LAND, EATING LOCUSTS AND WILD HONEY. IT WAS DURING THIS TIME, WE MUST ASSUME, THAT JOHN, LIKE THE PROPHETS OF OLD, FELT HIMSELF CALLED TO BE A SERVANT OF THE LORD. LIKE THE OLDER PROPHETS JOHN WAS AWARE OF ISRAEL'S UNFAITHFULNESS TO THEIR GOD. AS OF OLD, REPENTENCE AND RENEWAL WERE NECESSARY, HE BAPTIZED AND ENCOURAGED HIS LISTENERS TO LEAD A NEW LIFE. THIS WAS NOTHING NEW, MANY MEN HAD PREACHED REPENTENCE BEFORE. JUST LIKE CONTEMPOARY AMERICA, 1ST CENTURY PASLENTINE HAD AN ABUNDANCE OF TRAVELING EVANGELISTS. BUT JOHN'S MESSAGE HAD A NEW COLOR TO IT. THERE WAS A NEW URGENCY ABOUT IT. HE DID NOT PREACH REPENTENCE MERELY BECAUSE HE THOUGHT THE POPULACE NEEDED ETHICAL PRODDING, BUT BECAUSE HE WAS AWARE THAT SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN. HE KNEW THAT GOD WAS ABOUT TO ACT AND HIS PEOPLE WERE NOT READY. WHEN QUESTIONED IF HE WERE THE CHRIST, JOHN MAKES CLEAR THAT SOMEONE INFINITELY MORE IMPORTANT THAN HE IS COMING. THAT HE IS JUST TRYING TO LAY THE GROUND WORK FOR THE COMING MESSIAH.

FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNT WE CAN MAKE THE CONCLUSION THAT JOHN THE BAPTIST HAD QUITE A LARGE FOLLOWING. HE MUST HAVE BEEN A VERY ELOQUENT PREACHER, MEN THOUGH HE WAS THE CHRIST. THE SIZE OF HIS FOLLOWING AND THE STIR HE CREATED IS BEST INDICATED BY THE FACT THAT HE WAS ARRESTED AND PUT TO DEATH BY HEROD.

ALTHOUGH JOHN THE BAPTIST IS INTERESTING AS A PERSON WE MUST LEAVE HIM TO PURSUE THE MEANING OF WHAT HE DID, WHY HE IS SPECIALLY IMPORTANT DURING ADVENT.

IN INTRODUCING JOHN THE BAPTIST, LUKE QUOTES THE 40th CHAPTER OF ISAIAH INFERRING THAT JOHN IS THE ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, HE IS THE ONE WHO ACCORDING TO ISAIAH WILL CRY "PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD": HE IS THE ONE WHO WILL PRECEDE A WONDROUS ACT OF GOD.

LAST SUNDAY WE THOUGHT ABOUT THIS SAME SECTION OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH, ABOUT THE SUFFERING SERVANT. Prophecy of J.C. IT IS SIGNIFICANT INDEED THAT LUKE SHOULD SEE IN THIS VERY SAME NARRATIVE A PROPHECY FOR JOHN THE BAPTIST.

THE OCCASION OF ISAIAH'S WRITING WAS THE EXILE OF THE JEWS IN BABYLON, HIS SUBJECT WAS AN EXPLANATION OF WHY ISRAEL MUST SUFFER BUT AT THE SAME TIME HE WAS PROMISING THAT GOD HAD NOT FORGOTTEN, THE EXILE WILL SOON BE OVER.

His advice to his readers WAS PART OF SCRIPTURE THIS MORNING "PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT, EVERY VALLEY SHALL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL SHALL BE BROUGHT LOW, AND THE CROOKED SHALL BE MADE STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH WAYS SHALL BE MADE SMOOTH: AND ALL FLESH SHALL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD."

WHETHER ISAIAH HERE WAS REFERRING TO AN ACTUAL ROAD THROUGH THE NEAR EASTERN TOPOGRAPHY WE CANNOT BE SURE. WE CAN BE SURE, HOWEVER, OF LUKES ADOPTION OF THIS PASSAGE. THERE MUST BE SOME PREPARATION DONE BEFORE THE CHRIST WOULD HAVE ANY MEANING, MEN MUST RECOGNIZE HOW BADLY THEY NEEDED A SAVIOR, HOW FAR THEY HAD STRAYED FROM THE PATH OF THE LORD.

IT IS CONVENIENT THAT ISAIAH (AND LUKE) USED THE ANALOGY OF A ROAD THAT MUST BE BUILT FOR THE LORD. ROADS WERE IMPORTANT IN ANCIENT TIMES, BUT NOW ROADS ARE THE VERY LIFE LINE OF OUR CIVILIZATION. DID YOU EVER CONSIDER HOW LONG THE CITY OF CHICAGO COULD SURVIVE IF SUDDENLY ALL ROADS LEADING IN AND OUT OF IT WERE CLOSED. ROADS NOT ONLY TIE OUR CIVILIZATION TOGETHER THEY AARE IMPERATIVE TO THE EXISTENCE OF MODERN LIFE.

THIS IS A BAD SECTION OF THE COUNTRY IN WHICH TO ILLUSTRATE SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES INVOLVED IN BUILDING A ROAD. GRADING AND LAYING THE BED ARE THE HARDEST THINGS THAT MUST BE DONE IN INDIANA. BUT IN OTHER STATES PENNSYLVANIA OR COLORADO AND IN THE PALESTINE LUKE HAD IN MIND, THE BUILDING OF A ROAD BROUGHT A PICTURE TO MIND OF DIGGING, MOVING EARTH AND BOULDERS, A VERY DIFFICULT TASK. TO BUILD THE PENNSYLVANIA TURNPIKE WHICH NOW HAS MORE HILLS AND CURVES THAN ANY ROAD I'VE TRAVELED IN THIS VINCITY ENTAILED MOVING MILLIONS OF TONS OF EARTH AND ROCK, SEVEN TUNNELS VARYING IN LENGTH FROM 3/4 TO THREE MILES HAD TO BE DUG THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS. THIS IS THE KIND OF ROAD PREPARING LUKE HAD IN MIND.

LUKE DID NOT MEAN THIS LITERALLY, BUT WAS TALKING ABOUT THE TOPOGRAPHY OF THE HUMAN SOUL WHEN HE SAID MOUNTAINS AND HILLS MUST BE LEVELED AND VALLEYS FILLED. IN THIS ANALOGY HE WAS VOICING A TRUTH ABOUT HUMAN NATURE THAT IS SO VERY TRUE. THERE ARE BARRIERS TO THE TRUTH OF CHRIST IN EACH OF US: THERE ARE HILLS THAT MUST BE LEVELED AND GAPING HOLES TO BE FILLED. JUST AS HILLS AND VALLEYS ARE PART OF NATURAL TOPOGRAPHY SO THESE BARRIERS IN US ARE PART

OF OUR NATURE.

AND JUST AS MEN MUST STRUGGLE TO BUILD A ROAD THROUGH THE BARRIERS OF NATURE WE TOO MUST OVERCOME NATURAL HINDRANCES TO PREPARE A WAY FOR THE LORD. WE ARE THE SAME AS THE MEN WHO STOOD ON THE BANKS OF THE JORDAN AND HEARD JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACH. we too must prepare ourselves

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S SOLE TASK WAS PREPARING THE WAY FOR THE ONE THAT WAS TO COME AFTER HIM. ALL HIS PREACHING WAS DIRECTED AT STRIKING THE HEART OF EVERY MAN WITH THE NEWS THAT EACH AND EVERYONE NEEDED A SAVIOR: AT POUNDING HOME THE TRUTH THAT THE MOUNTAINS OF PRIDE AND SELF SUFFICIENCYL THE VALLEYS OF IGNORANCE AND LAZINESS WERE BARRIERS TO AWARENESS OF THE SON OF GOD. THE CHRIST WAS IN THEIR MIDST BUT UNLESS THEY REPENTED, UNLESS THEY ACKNOWLEDGED THE FACT OF THEIR DIRE NEED OF A SAVIOR, THEY WOULD NEVER RECOGNIZE HIM. HIS TASK WAS TO PREPARE HIS LISTENERS FOR THE COMING OF CHRIST HE WAS THE FIRST TO OBSERVE ADVENT.

AS YOU RECALL THAT IS EXACTLY THE PURPOSE OF THE ADVENT SEASON. THREE WEEKS FROM TODAY WE WILL CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF OUR LORD--WE WILL SING THE TRADITIONAL CAROLS WITH JOY AND WARMTH, WE WILL REENACT THE MIRACULOUS EVENT IN ADORNING OUR CHURCH AND HOMES WITH NATIVITY SCENES. BUT FIRST WE MUST

PREPARE A WAY FOR HIS COMING BY PREPARING OURSELVES. WE MUST REMOVE THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS AND THE SWAMPY VALLEYS THAT ARE PRESENT IN EACH ONE OF US.

THE GREATEST BARRIER FOR EVERY CHRISTIAN IN AMERICA WHO IS TRYING TO PREPARE HIMSELF FOR CHRISTMAS IS OBVIOUSLY A CULTURAL ONE. WHAT WE AMERICANS HAVE DONE TO THE CELEBRATION OF THE BIRTH OF THE CHRIST CHILD IS A SUBJECT TO WHICH I WILL DEVOTE AN ENTIRE SERMON IN TWO WEEKS. LET IT SUFFICE HERE MERELY TO STATE THE PROBLEM AND ASSUMING ITS PRESENCE GO ON TO AN EXAMINATION OF THE BARRIERS THAT EXIST IN US PERSONALLY.

WE ARE TO PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, TO BUILD A ROAD SO THAT ALL AREAS OF LIFE MIGHT BE OPEN TO HIS COMING. BUT TO BUILD THIS ROAD WE MUST OVERCOME THE EXISTING NATURAL BARRIERS. LET US CALL THE MOUNTAINS WE MUST REMOVE-SELF PRIDE: AND THE VALLEYS TO BE FILLED-SELF SUFFICIENCY.

SELF PRIDE, OR SELF CENTEREDNESS IS THE VERY BASIS FOR THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN. CHURCHMEN THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES HAVE REALIZED THAT SOMETHING IS RADICALLY WRONG WITH MAN AND THAT SOMETHING HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN EQUATED WITH SELF CENTERED PRIDE. THE STORY OF THE FALL OF ADAM POINTS TO THE TRUTH THAT MAN IN GENERAL IS SIMPLY TO PROUD TO ACCEPT HIS

STATUS AS CREATURE AND GOD'S AS CREATOR. MAN WANTS MORE, HE MUST BE THE BOSS. THESE ARE THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS BUT I KNOW OF NO BETTER WAY TO SAY IT.

PERHAPS THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF PRIDE, OR SELF CENTEREDNESS IS MORE MEANINGFUL IF WE LOOK FOR A MOMENT TO THE RELATIVELY NEW FIELD OF PSYCHIATRY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY. ALMOST UNANIMOUSLY PSYCHIATRISTS POINT TO MAN'S INABILITY TO SEE BEYOND HIMSELF AS THE ROOT OF ALL EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCES. A PSYCHIATRISTS JOB, FOR THE MOST PART, IS TO MAKE HIS PATIENT SEE PAST HIS OWN SELF, TO BRING INTO FOCUS BROADER HORIZONS, NEW POSSIBILITIES AND ALTERNATIVES.

PUTTING IT AS SIMPLY AS POSSIBLE, EVERY MAN, YOU AND I, BY OUR NATURE ARE AFFLICTED WITH SELF CENTEREDNESS OR PRIDE, AND THIS IS THE EVIL WE CALL ORIGINAL SIN.

IN MAGNITUDE IT IS INDEED A MOUNTAIN. AND AS WE PARTICIPATE IN ADVENT, AS WE STRUGGLE TO BUILD A ROAD FOR THE LORD, WE MUST BE AWARE OF ITS PRESENCE, WE MUST DO ALL WE CAN TO LEVEL IT, SO THAT THE GOOD NEWS OF BETHLEHEM CAN GET THROUGH.

THE SECOND NATURAL BARRIER I SOPKE OF WAS SWAMPY VALLEYS, I HAVE COMPARED THEM TO SELF SUFFICIENCY.

IT IS USUALLY HELD THAT POETS AND AUTHORS ARE PROPHETS OF THE CULTURE. THEY ARE THE SENSITIVE EARS THAT PICK OUT THE UNDERLYING STRAINS IN OUR DAY TO DAY LIFE. FROM OUT OF THE NOISES OF EXISTENCE THEY HEAR THE STRANDS OF A PEOPLE'S TRUE IDEAS AND ASSUMPTIONS. AND BEGINNING NEARLY ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO IN THE VOICE OF FREIDERICH NIETZSCHE AND STEMMING DOWN TO OUR OWN TIME IN FRANZ KAFKA AND JEAN-PAUL SARTRE POETS, WRITERS AND AUTHORS HAVE BEEN PROCLAIMING THAT GOD IS DEAD! MAN HAS ADVANCED TO A STAGE WHERE BELIEF IN A GOD IS NO LONGER NECESSARY, THE OLD MYTH MAY BE CAST OFF. MAN IS ALONE, FACED WITH THE CHALLENGE OF BEING MASTER OF ALL HE SURVEYS. PROUD AND DEFIANT MAN IS THE SOLE RULER OF ALL NATURE--GOD IS DEAD.

I DOUBT WHETHER ANY OF YOU--OR VERY MANY INDIVIDUALS ANYWEHRE WOULD JOIN IN THEIR CRY. BUT I DO THINK THAT THESE MEN HAVE GRASPED A TREND, THEY HAVE SENSED A DIRECTION IN WHICH WE ARE TRAVELING.

AT NO TIME IN HISTORY HAS MAN BEEN SO POWERFUL; THROUGH SCIENCE NATURE IS BEING CONQUERED, SKY SCRAPERS BUILT, WARS FOUGHT, DISEASE WIPED OUT

AND SO ON. AND ABOVE IT ALL IS THE FEELING THAT WE CAN MASTER JUST ABOUT ANY CONCEIVABLE SITUATION. THE SELF SUFFICIENCY OF OUR CIVILIZATION IS WORDED VERY NICELY IN THE FOOTBALL CHEER "IF WE CAN'T DO IT--NOBODY CAN!"

AS PARTS OF OUR CULTURE WE CANNOT HELP BUT BE INFLUENCED BY THIS FEELING. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE TOLD OVER AND OVER THAT THEY CAN ACHIEVE ANYTHING THEY SET THEIR SIGHTS ON IF THEY WILL TRY HARD ENOUGH. NOTHING IS OUT OF THE REALM OF POSSIBILITY FOR ALMIGHTY MAN. OUR CULTURE, IS NOT ONE THAT PUTS MUCH STOCK IN HUMILITY.

AND AS PART OF THIS CULTURE A BABY BORN IN BETHLEHEM TO SAVE US DOES NOT HAVE MUCH MEANING. "SAVE US FROM WHAT?"" IF THERE IS ANY SAVING TO DO WE CAN DO IT OURSELVES."

THIS IS A GREAT BARRIER FOR EACH ONE OF US. IT IS CREATED BY OUR CULTURE AND NURTURED BY OUR SELF PRIDE. BUT IN PREPARING A WAY FOR THE LORD, IN BUILDING OUR ADVENT ROAD WE MUST SURMOUNT IT. IT IS A VALLEY THAT MUST BE FILLED. — A gaping void - over which the needs of the savior cannot jump — We must fill it

FILLED WITH THE FACT THAT WE ARE NOT SUFFICIENT, THAT WE DIRELY NEED HELP. ALL OUR TECHNILOGICAL ACHIEVEMENTS ARE NOTHING BECAUSE INDIVIDUALLY,

SPIRITUALLY WE NEED HELP. IF WE ARE WILLING TO ADMIT THIS, THE BIRTH OF THE CHRIST CHILD WILL TRULY BE AN OCCASION OF JOY. IF WE ARE READY TO ADMIT PERSONALLY THAT LIFE IS RATHER MEANINGLESS THEN THE MEANING OF BETHLEHEM WILL BE AN OCCASION FOR GREAT REJOICING.

TWENTY CENTURIES AFTER JOHN THE BAPTIST STOOD ON THE BANKS OF THE JORDAN IMPLORING HIS LISTENERS TO BUILD A ROAD, WE FIND THAT THE SAME ROAD STILL NEEDS CONSTRUCTION. THE SAME MOUNTAINS AND BOULDERS MUST BE CLEARED. IN ADVENT MORE THAN ANY OTHER TIME OF THE YEAR WE MUST GIVE SERIOUS CONSIDERATION TO THIS TASK. ONLY IF WE SUCCEED IN BUILDING THE ROAD WILL OUR LIVES BE ACCESSIBLE TO THE CHRIST.